UNIVERSITETET I BERGEN
Sosiologisk institutt

On the conception of human subject in subjective survey data

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By Michal Kozak

Introduction

This paper is meant to be a critical reflection of certain epistemological problems related to analysis and interpretation of so called subjective survey data, i.e. all the quantitative data referring to respondents' subjective mental worlds, states and representations (e.g. values, attitudes, opinions or satisfactions). I argue that while specificity and difficulty of subjective data is routinely recognized in most of the survey research, its true philosophical sources and implications remain still relatively unexplored. The main message of the paper is that fundamental problems of subjective data are the implicit ontological assumptions made about their authors, the respondents themselves. To analyze linguistic self-reports about respondents' subjectivity as facts, a perfect cognitive ability of respondents to contemplate on and communicate such content has to be assumed at first place. While this approach renders the factual analysis of subjective data methodologically possible, it also leads to empirical results which show that such data are highly imprecise, at least when subjected to the same technical criteria as data that are of factual nature (e.g. validity, reliability etc.). In other words, subjective data are said to contain an enormous share of measurement error and it is therefore suggested to either meticulously refine their measurement before the data collection process, or to avoid usage of such data whenever it is possible.

I argue that source of the whole problem is rather of philosophical than technical nature and therefore its solution should also be sought first and foremost in the realm of theory. As I see it, the issue has to do with self-evident Cartesian ontology of a fully autonomous and self-determined subject/respondent, which is often implicitly taken as the epistemological starting point in the survey-based analyses. Conception that assumes respondents to be fully capable of providing valid and reliable reports on their subjectivity logically leads to conceptualization of error as of something non-systematic, occurring only on the basis of random procedural disturbances. However, such approach reaches its obvious limits when confronted with the crude reality of inconsistent, erroneous and systematically biased subjective survey data.

In this paper I allow myself for a provocative thought experiment and I try to replace the implicit Cartesian subject of survey with its absolute theoretical negation: the subject of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacanian subject is well known for possessing precisely the opposite qualities of the Cartesian one. That said, Lacanian subject is theorized as externally determined, unaware of the extent of her own determination and being ex principio unable to access the reality of her own subjectivity. Such subject can only generate self-reports that are systematically erroneous by default and it therefore challenges the conventional understanding of error too. For respondents cannot do otherwise, it is the error that occurs systematically in their reports, while valid and reliable reports appear only accidentally, if ever at all.

Even though it may appear non-sensical, I want to explore what would adoption of such conception mean for the reality of subjective survey data analysis. Borrowing from various resources I am going to argue that this might be an interesting way how to boost the scientific credibility and sociological relevance of the method. Instead of extensive calibration of existing measurement tools with the goal of achieving ever greater reliability and validity of the data, quantitative researchers interested in subjective data should perhaps focus more on the embracement of these epistemological shortcomings and explicitly conceptualize their subjects in a more theoretically informed way.

The paper is then structured as follows. First, I draw a clear conceptual line between various different kinds of survey data and I specify which particular kind data do I have in mind when I speak of subjective social survey data. The second part of the paper is concerned with reconstruction of ontological properties of subjects of such data, as they appear in the contemporary literature on nature and causes of measurement error in the survey research. The third part theorizes the findings and argues that the implicit conception of the subject found in the survey-based literature on measurement error is uncritically inspired by a self-evident and simplified version of Cartesian epistemology. Last part of the paper challenges this conception as inadequate and confronts it with its opposite, the subject of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Finally, the concluding part of the paper investigates what potential implications would adoption of this theoretically informed Lacanian conception of human subject had for the research practice in the field of subjective survey analysis.

An important thing to be mentioned concerns the terminology I use in the text. Even though I am well aware of significant conceptual differences, I use the terms individual, respondent and subject as interchangeable equivalents. While the meaning of individual is obvious, I tend to speak of (a) respondent when I refer to individuals addressed as respondent by social survey and of (b) subjects when I refer to the abstract philosophical individuality.

Finally, before proceeding to the actual text I want to clarify few points. Even though I am critical to some of the practices found in the contemporary survey-based research on subjective matters, by no means do I imply that the critique applies to the whole field as such. Survey research offers many great examples showing that researchers are well aware of the issues I discuss, even though their diagnosis as well as suggested solutions may differ greatly from mine. Also, by being critical to the manner in which survey-based research understands and processes subjective issues I don't mean to suggest that some other research traditions would be superior when it comes to this specific kind of data material. On the very contrary, I am convinced that as far as autonomous reflective subject is assumed, problems discussed in this paper concern all kinds of social researchers, be it ethnographers, ground theorists or survey researchers[1]. The third thing I want to explicitly mention is that my criticism is not in line with the classical social constructivism/social realism debate. That said, I don't favor any of the sides and I openly admit that the question whether subjective social phenomena exist objectively in reality is only of secondary importance, the focus being on subjects instead. Last but not least, I would like to explicitly state my interests and motivations for writing this paper. As a researcher my main area of interest is the survey data analysis, hence choice of the topic is obvious. On the other hand, my interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis is in a way extracurricular, purely personal and esthetical in the first place. That said, while I tried to be as objective as possible in the analytical part of the paper, I admit that my conclusions regarding the superiority of Lacanian conception are heavily influenced by personal theoretical preferences. Therefore, this paper aspires for nothing more than a critical and provocative reflection, which makes absolutely no claims regarding generalizability of its findings and conclusions.

[1] It might very well be the case that the issues discussed in this paper are up to a certain extent generalizable to any kind of empirical data used in social sciences, at least as far as the data come in form of reports provided by human subjects. After all, social survey is but one of the instruments of observation (Bourdieu et al. 1991: 44-45) based on a simple age-old practice of finding things out by asking people questions (Tourangeau et al 2000). True, here the process of asking and answering occurs under a framework that is fairly different from an everyday face-to-face interaction. However, the source of information remains the same: human subject who is expected to be conscious, autonomous and communicating in language whose meanings are fluid and not capable of unique determination (Marsh 1984: 83). As far as this subject is concerned then problems and conclusions drawn in the paper might be quite general and impact virtually all social scientists. However, despite all these similarities I make absolutely no generality claims for the argument.

Part I: Subjective survey data

Subjective social survey data are part of a larger survey-data family. Even though they share many similarities with other kinds of survey data, they are also characterized by a few specificities. So, let me first spend a while explaining what I mean by subjective survey data, how do they differ from other types of survey data and what some specific caveats are when it comes to their use and interpretation.

Inner worlds

If survey is a method of observation of people based on their questioning, then the easiest way of survey data categorization can be made on the ground of what specific kind of question is being asked. Thus May (2011) distinguishes between factual surveys that seek to gain information concerning the material situation of individuals, attitudinal surveys that gather information on individual opinions and social psychological and explanatory surveys that are also concerned with attitudes, albeit in a more theoretical and analytical matter. It is clear that the last three survey categories have an obvious common denominator: they all deal with people's attitudes, that is, with something immaterial and inherently subjective. Therefore, the whole proposed categorization could be collapsed into a simple dichotomy of factual vs. attitudinal surveys. A similar approach can be found in Tourangeau et al. (2000) despite the fact that authors focus on the categorization of survey questions and not of surveys as such. According to these, a survey question can be either factual, asking about respondent's personal activities or circumstances, or attitudinal, in which case it asks about respondent's opinion. Similarly Wilkman (2006) distinguishes between different measurement scenarios that can occur within the framework of a survey. The focus is either on outer worlds, i.e. actual material conditions under which people live, or on their inner worlds which may stand for perceptions, values or stances.

It is possible to list many more similar examples of other survey categorization attempts. It wouldn't make much sense since most authors arrive at a conclusion that is roughly identical to those just mentioned. The bottom line is that any survey, question or a selected measurement tool can either be concerned with material things that positively exist in the outer reality and are physically external to respondent (e.g. living conditions); or it can deal with non-phenomenal issues, that exist only in the form of mental representations, which are internal to the respondent (for instance values, attitudes, opinion). It follows that data generated in former case are factual or objective, whereas the data brought about in the latter case are subjective.

When it comes to factual data, consensus is that their usage is generally unproblematic – any individual should be, at least in theory, capable of describing her external circumstances (Wilkman 2006). On the other hand, things get much more complicated in the case of subjective data. Opinions differ from

discipline to discipline but a general skepticism prevails as to what information do they actually contain (Bertrand – Mullainathan 2000: 67). Abstracting from technical measurement-related issues, the biggest issue is in fact ontological. It is unclear whether subjective mental representations such as attitudes, values or opinions exist in a sufficiently coherent form to be reported and measured. In fact, respondents may not have formed any of the attitudes in question, or their attitudes might not be articulated clearly enough, or they may be wrong about what they think (*sic*) of their own attitudes (Bertrand – Mullainathan 2000: 68). Previous research has shown that there might be a reason for concern. The first indication is that when respondents are interviewed repeatedly, their answers to the same subjective questions tend to be surprisingly unstable over time (Wilkman 2006). The second and perhaps even more worrying indication is the lack of correspondence between answers individuals provide for the similarly focused questions within the same survey (Wilkman 2006). Not to mention problems with potential social desirability bias. Since subjective data usually deal with sensitive issues, respondents might be unwilling to report on attitudes that are considered to be controversial. Respondents may also try to save their face in the eyes of interviewer in case the answer may reveal something unpleasant about them (Bertrand – Mullainathan 2000).

The ontological problem with subjective social survey data translates itself into methodological problems of questionable validity and low reliability of such data when used in the analysis. But then again, if such data may not capture what researchers usually assume they do, what kind of information do they contain? Furthermore, even if subjective data capture the desired information, it seems they do so in a matter that is quite unreliable.

Value judgements

The definition of subjectivity of survey data based on the sphere of their reference is only partial and far from being exhaustive. The survey data can actually be subjective in another important aspect – in the extent to which they depart from a mere description and bear the stamp of respondent's subjective judgement. It is in this respect that even the data that have an external material source of reference, such as living conditions, can also contain great deal of subjective input.

I am actually talking about a specific mental operation that respondent has to perform in order to evaluate her external circumstances. According to Tåhlin (1990) whenever a respondent performs a value judgement of certain x (or in other words evaluate it as good/bad, high/low, etc.) this is in fact equivalent with asking her how satisfied she is with that x. The problem is that answers to satisfaction question are in general very difficult to decipher, since the final satisfaction scores reflect various different factors. First, satisfaction depends on specific constellation of needs that an individual considers important to satisfy. The second factor is the aspiration level, i.e. the level that she finds reasonable to attain in regard to those needs. And the third and last factor is the actual state of conditions of the substance in question.

However, one can never be sure which of the three factors accounts for what part of the difference found either in time or between different groups of the population. While the impact of the first factor can be relatively easily eliminated through a very precise delimitation of what is to be evaluated by respondent, the influence of varying aspirations is much more difficult to filter away. The biggest problem is that aspirations change in a rather predictable fashion – they tend to adjust to one's actual conditions, that is to her environment in time and space. While repeated failures and setbacks reduce expectations and demands, repeated success work in the exactly opposite direction. But aspirations are determined also socially and they tend to adjust to standards prevailing in one's reference group (Åhlin 1990).

All in all, this means that very little variation is usually found in satisfaction data. The answers that different respondents provide – both from a longitudinal and cross-sectional perspective - are usually quite alike with minor differences only. In other words, people tend to report constant satisfaction levels, no matter what the actual state of entity in question is like.

The problem is that when objective material conditions are measured subjectively, one can never be sure whether resulting scores are attributable to objectively existing material differences or to the differences in subjective aspirations of respondents. Not to forget that there usually is very little difference in the subjective data to analyze and explain. Using sociological terminology, one could say that subjective measures of this kind suffer from low validity and low variability. To put it more simply, it is not sure what exactly is it that the data are capturing, but it seems like these phenomena are rather stable across social groups and over the time.

Part II: Anatomy of the error

Medical strategy

Experienced medical doctors often emphasize to their students that the best way to learn about the anatomy of the functioning human organism is through the rigorous study of its pathology, that is, through a close inspection of instances where something went wrong. I adopt a similar approach in the following section, but instead of a physical body I focus on pathologies of subjective data as they are elaborated by quantitatively working scholars under the concept of measurement error. I am going to show that - according to the mainstream understanding – a great share of this error originates in cognitive processes of a responding subject. Therefore, by analyzing the error and its sources, one can learn much not only about the normal anatomy of the data but of the subject of this data as well.

True values and the measurement error

In survey research it has been traditionally assumed that there is a stable and comprehensible underlying reality that can be found behind whatever that is measured by survey items. This underlying reality is also expected to have clear and measurable properties that are constituted by a set of so called true values (Wilkman 2006). However, due to the malicious impact of various kind of measurement and response errors that occur along the way, estimates of these true values derived from a survey are almost always biased. Therefore, only if one obtains sufficient knowledge of this bias, of its extent and nature, only then it is possible – at least theoretically – to correct the estimates and thus gain adequate knowledge of the true values in question (Wilkman 2006).

In statistics this error is conceptualized as mean squared error, or a summation of divergences of various kind from an observable true value that exist in the population of interest (Wilkman 2006). Its sources are seen mostly in incorrect sampling procedures (Tourangeau et al. 2000). In psychology and social science tradition, the error is conceptualized somewhat differently: as a property that is practically unavoidable and inherent to any kind of measurement. Whatever the result of measurement, it is always thought of as a combination of a directly unobservable true value and some necessary amount of the error. This error comes from so called response effects which stand for all the “differences in survey outcomes that reflect seemingly irrelevant procedural details, such as the order in which the answer categories are presented (Tourangeau et al. 2000: 2).” These in turn have their origin in imperfect mental processes of the respondents, for instance in their inability to understand the question properly, in problems with remembering or retrieval of the relevant information or in the final step of producing an appropriate answer.

No matter what definition of the error one choses the goal is always to minimize its extent and to achieve the greatest possible accuracy of the data. However, the two approaches differ somewhat in suggestions how this accuracy should actually be achieved. Whereas according to the statistical understanding it is to make sure sampling from the population is done properly, according to the conceptualization prevailing in social sciences, accuracy of the survey depends on the accuracy of the question and therefore the emphasis is rather on refinement of the measuring instrument, i.e. the question itself.

Survey process

Recent years have seen a lot of effort being invested into the study of design of survey questions (see Bertrand – Mullaihatan 2000, Schwarz et al. 2007, Tourangeau – Bradbur 2010, Tourangeau et al. 2000, Wilkman 2006). The aim was to find out how to design a perfect question, which would generate answers that are as response-effect-free as possible. Doing so researches actually did much more. Based on the cognitive science and artificial intelligence research they constructed a model of what exactly goes on in the respondent's mind when she is answering a survey question. They broke down the whole process of answering into different cognitive stages and analyzed what can possibly go wrong at every stage, i.e. where can the error occur and how. It is an excellent read from methodological and epistemological point of view since it clearly demonstrates what kind of human subject researchers expect to be addressing with their surveys.

According to the cognitive model of the survey process, providing an answer to a subjective survey question[2] actually involves execution of four mental tasks. The respondent must first decipher the intended meaning of the question and understand what exactly she is being asked about. To do so, she relies on the same tacit assumption that govern the conduct of conversation in daily life: she expects the researcher to provide her with instructions and questions that are relevant, informative and clear and in turn she also tries to contribute with answers that are of the same qualities, as if it would be a real conversation (Schwarz et. al 2007). The process of understanding then occurs on three inter-related levels. On a syntactic level, the respondent must understand grammatical relations between words in order to grasp logic of representations these words stand for. On a semantic level, the respondent must retrieve intended meanings of all the words in question. Finally, on a pragmatic level, she must grasp underlying intent of the question as a whole (Tourangeau – Bradbur 2010). If she misunderstands or misinterprets question at any of the levels, her answer will most likely be inaccurate and biased, containing a significant amount of measurement error. Bias at this level may have a snowball effect, since all the following cognitive procedures will be based on her erroneous understanding.

[2] There are in fact two cognitive models. Researchers have designed specific model for factual questions and a slightly different one for subjective questions.

Once the question is understood, the respondent must retrieve whatever information that is needed for formulation of the answer. Notice that in the specific case of subjective data, this information is not a goal per se: it is only a tool that is necessary for value judgement/attitude positioning, which are the information sought by the question. Even though most of the research on attitudes takes it for granted that people have pre-formulated ready-made attitudes that are stored in the memory, ready to be recalled upon a request, this is rarely the case (Tourangeau et al. 2000). More often respondent retrieve some general information, specific memories, or certain impression from which she infers her answer. In any case, memory of respondent is involved in this process, although automatically and beyond her control. At first, the long-term memory is searched for the relevant information and once this one it is identified, it is being transferred into working-memory from where it can be consciously accessed (Tourangeau – Bradbur 2010). The problem is that people tend to forget things as time goes by. So, when confronted with a request to recall the information, the memory often fails them. Either it fails to provide any information at all, or it comes up with an information that is awry and erroneous in some way (for instance it comes from what the respondent heard or read about the object of interest, but she wrongly assumes it to have origin in her personal experience). If the respondent misunderstood the question, she may even retrieve information that is supposedly correct, but irrelevant given the meaning intended by researcher. Another problem is that the judgement is dominantly informed by information that are immediately available at the time of judgement (Schwarz et al. 2007). Therefore, if the respondent does not have enough time to search the memory carefully, or she does not invest enough effort and does it only sloppily, the resulting answer will likely contain a great deal of error and be far away from desired true value.

The third step of the survey process happens after the necessary information gets retrieved from respondent's memory. At this stage, the information is processed into subjective position or used for generation of value judgement. Respondent may either follow a top-down strategy and cobble her position together from multiple general values, or she can follow a bottom-up strategy, recalling and evaluating particular bits and pieces that she remembers are relevant to for the entity in question and integrating these partial judgements into a complex one. It is further stipulated that in order to provide value judgement, respondent first forms a mental representation of the object she is supposed to judge, then forms representation of certain standard to confront it with and then, finally compare the two and arrive at a judgement (Tourangeau – Bradbur 2010). Most of what can go wrong at this point is actually still related to the shortcomings of memory and erroneousness of the initial information or to the problems of understanding. It would be foolish to think of erroneous values respondent recalls for her judgment, incorrect mental representation of the object she is supposed to evaluate or of a wrong standard she assesses the object against. All these would not reflect an error but rather a different subjective criterion one uses as standard. In other words, a problem similar to unknown impact of different aspirational levels on the differences in satisfaction scores.

Finally, in the fourth and last stage the respondent “translates” the subjective judgement she recalled or constructed into one of the response categories provided in the answering sheet. Here, the likelihood and nature of error depends greatly on the measurement tool, i.e. on the form the answer takes. When there are no categories and the answer is to be formulated as a number, respondents tend to report round values more often. When response has a form of scale, respondents may be tempted to give ratings that are more favorable than reality (positivity bias) and to avoid extreme ratings (response contraction). In case of categorical options, respondents may favor those options that are listed either first, or last (response order effect). However, the most common source of error at this stage has nothing to do with any cognitive process but depends rather on respondents’ idea of what answer would be socially at least acceptable, if not desirable. As a matter of fact, respondents often perform a kind of self-censorship, editing of her answers before reporting them. „There are several reasons why they „edit” their answers in this way, but most the most common one is to avoid embarrassing themselves in front of an interviewer. As a result, respondents tend to report things that they haven’t done, but feel that they should have done (...) or to deny doing things that they have done but feel that that they shouldn´t have (...) (Tourangeau –Bradbur 2010: 324).” Needless to say, such answers would again be heavily biased since they would not correspond with respondents’ real subjective position, but with a position they recognize as legitimate.

If I sum up what I have written about the measurement error so far, it may seem as if everything happens rather automatically. Where an error occurs, it is mainly due to malfunctions of respondent’s cognitive processing that are almost mechanical (be it understanding, memory, or answer selection). Except for social desirability editing perhaps, it looks like there is not much space for respondent to actively influence the precision of her answer or, from a different point of view, the extent and nature of the error. She cannot do otherwise, but to speak the “truth”. It also seems that the error is to a great extent just a matter of chance – will instructions clearly communicate the desired meaning this time, will the memory deliver correct information and will presence of interviewer or the offer of response categories influence the cognition of a respondent or not? The researcher can make sure that a communication with respondent is as transparent as possible: that questions are formulated in clear fashion, that response categories correspond realistically to all potential answers and that there is enough time for a respondent to recall what is needed. But except for that, the researcher is basically at the mercy of respondents’ cognition. And so is the respondent. This whole impression changes once the last assumption of the survey process is revealed. So far, it has been showed that respondents’ answers are brought about by series of different cognitive operations. However, according to the survey process researchers, respondents may actively decide exactly which mental processes will be executed as well as how precise their execution will be. In other words, each of the cognitive operations can, but not necessarily will be carried out, and if it will it can be carried out either carefully or sloppily, all depending on the effort the respondent is willing and capable of investing (Schwartz et al. 2000). It follows that in order to obtain

error-free responses, researcher should motivate respondent to invest the effort required for careful execution of all the necessary mental processes.

Part III: Theorizing the implicit

Cartesian subject of the survey

Let me now summarize the main implicit assumptions about subjects that logically result from the outlined conception of the survey process and its errors. First and foremost, it is assumed that (1) a "truth" (underlying reality) about subjects' internal worlds objectively exists. It is further stipulated that (2) subject possesses this objective truth and can deliberately access it through the process of conscious cognitive introspection (the survey process). This truth can not only be accessed, but can as well (3) be linguistically expressed and intersubjectively communicated (the survey report). Finally, (4) the reported truth may and often does differ from the objective truth – however, this difference does not reflect subject's inability to access and communicate the truth, but rather random procedural disturbances that occur along the way (the measurement error).

It is obvious that all the aforementioned postulates point to a conception of human subject that is very intuitive. This conception takes the subject for what it appears to be at the first sight: an autonomous, rational and reflective individual. When such subject errs in reflections about her inner worlds, it is always and only an error; that is, a random mistake, merely a momentarily digression from the normal and expected course of action. Except for the error, the subject is fully capable and responsible for perfection in thinking, reflecting and reporting about herself, and this truthful perfection is the assumed default. This understanding of the human subject may even appear to be natural and in a way a-theoretical at the first glance. After all, it merely confirms the a priori intuitive self-understanding of human beings that experience themselves in everyday life as active, self-determined and conscious agents. This conception has its very particular theoretical basis in what is often referred to as either Cartesian, or Kantian philosophy. In line with this tradition of thinking, human subject is seen as "a meaning-making subject (…), a self-conscious subject, in this active, self-determining relation to itself in all experience as well as in all action (Pippin 2005: 2)." However, except for the intuitive plausibility of this conception, there are no other scientific or theoretical reasons for why every subject should be characterized by precisely these qualities. On the contrary, should not this understanding be subjected to an even greater scientific scepticism precisely because of its intuitive appeal? For is it not one of the most important tasks of the science, and social science specifically, to refute all the everyday truths that assert themselves as self-evident?

Limits of the obvious choice

There are, nevertheless, solid reasons for theoretical "a-priority" of the Cartesian conception, but they are rather political than scientific. As Pippin reminds us, Cartesian subject is a theoretical construct of

the modern bourgeois society and its philosophy. That is, it is employed in the endeavour to justify what is arguably the highest political value of this society – the individual freedom. Hence, only with the help of Cartesian subject could modern bourgeois philosophers explain "how it is possible (…) that individual subjects could uniquely (…) direct the course of their own lives, why it has become so important that we seek to achieve this state maximally, consistent with a like liberty for all, what that means, why it is just to call on the coercive force of law to ensure such a possibility (…) and so forth (Pippin 2005: 1)." And the modern science is, after all, a product of the same bourgeois society.

However, the concept is rather limiting when applied to scientific inquiry of human subjectivity. In my view, it encourages empirical research that is inherently positivist. It is not necessarily the quantitative aspect or the questionnaire format, but the implicit Cartesian understanding of the object of its study that makes subjective survey comparatively more problematic. Postulates (2) and (3) assert that subject's linguistic expressions concerning her inner worlds are in fact be both valid and reliable. Yes, they may get biased by error but in general, they are conceptually unproblematic. If one accepts these assumptions, then one also accepts that linguistic expressions can be in principle treated, processed as examined as any other scientific fact. This kind of thinking then leads to the opinion that there is an underlying objectivity behind subjective phenomena, which is waiting in the outer reality to be scientifically uncovered. The only thing one needs to do in order to approach this subjective reality, is to ask respondents about the phenomena. Therefore, any layers of subjectivity that may potentially exist beyond subjects' conscious reflection are a priori ruled out of the analysis. And, vice versa, anything that subjects claim about their subjectivity is a priori treated as a fact reflecting precisely this subjectivity and nothing more.

The Cartesian conception of subject implicitly applied in the survey research may be naively intuitive, politically motivated, and arguably positivist in its scientific application but none of these predicates makes it also automatically wrong. As many great thinkers including Hegel, Nietzsche and Freud pointed out, this conception is simply incomplete (Pippin 2005: 2). For example, if one had to use the implicit assumptions to explain why subjective data are comparatively more precarious than objective data, she would probably conclude that it has to do with the fact that few more cognitive operations - and thus more opportunities for cognitive failure - are involved in the former case. Also, the subjective information are arguably much more sensitive and thus are also more likely to be self-censored by subjects. In other words, the process of generation of the subjective survey data is just much more prone to the measurement error bias. An advice for researchers would then follow, to be extremely cautions with the development and calibration of the measurement tools (questions, or scales), so that any possibility of response effect bias is effectively minimized. The only problem with this strategy is that it does not yield satisfactory results. This is obvious from the academic polemics about the problems of subjective data that still raise the same questions as ca. 30 years ago (see summary in Tourangeau et al. 2000).

Nevertheless, an alternative explanation asserts itself at the same time. One that refuses all the implicit assumptions as well as their underlying philosophical basis. As Slavoj Žižek often puts it: but what if the opposite is true? What if (1) there exists no objective truth about subjects' inner mental worlds? Or, if one accepted that such truth may exist, what if (2) it is in fact determined externally and it is by no means cognitively accessible by subjects themselves? What if (3) the linguistic discourses that subjects consciously produce about their inner worlds are in fact only fictional and their role is to obfuscate the truth rather than to reveal it. What if (4) the self-reports that subjects produce are flawed systematically; not as a matter of some momentarily disturbance but as a default. Would it not mean that subjective data that social scientists conventionally analyse in terms of true values, consists, strictly speaking, almost exclusively of error?

Part IV: Subject of the opposite truth

No truth?

The idea of stable underlying reality with measurable properties is generally speaking not at all wrong. Actually, when applied to appropriate research problems, that is to phenomena with concrete material reference in the external reality, it makes great epistemological sense. In principle, subjects should be perfectly able to report about such entities – something tangible may be remembered, described, reported on, even in spite of occasional mistakes. However, this particular research scenario cannot be treated as a universal standard. And, it clearly cannot be applied in case of subjective survey data, where the existence of objective reality is at least questionable.

This finding is, however, far from being revolutionary. Most of the survey research scholars have long time ago admitted that the idea of "absolute truth lying waiting for a sociologist with keen sense perception and good measuring instruments to tap is absurd (Marsh 1984: 97)." As Willkman (2006) points out, the lack of precision is much more substantial. "It is present as natural element in reality of what is being measured – due to linguistic prerequisites and unclear ideas on the part of the individual." In other words, it is extremely difficult to clearly communicate about such abstract and subjective matter and even when the communication is successful, it is unclear whether subjects established or thought about any of the inner subjective representations in question. A conclusion follows, that since survey method is built around the idea of the underlying objective reality, it should only be applied to cases where such reality objectively exists. Only descriptive questions about tangible things that people can clearly observe, put into their memory, or think about are suggested to be asked. This basically means that the substantial precariousness of the subjective data is in principle unsolvable. What some of the survey researchers suggest, then, is to avoid analysis of such data at all (see Wilkman 2006, Bertrand – Mullainathan 2000). This conclusion is in my view a little bit too radical and unnecessary.

Unknown known

One does not have to buy all the radical criticism of quantitative social science (see Marsh 1984) to admit that there are clear limitations to the survey method. To paraphrase Bourdieu, survey is just one of many instruments of observation, one that presupposes its own set of exclusions "the most pernicious of which are unconscious (Bourdieu et al. 1991: 44)." Exclusions of this kind are only logical: no one can correctly answer any question that would deal with issues that are located outside one's conscious.

To illustrate the issue in more details, let me take Žižek's typology of four possible kinds of knowledge. First there exist such phenomena that are (1) "known knowns". These are simply the things we know,

that we know. It is, in other words, a knowledge of the things that we are consciously aware of. But then, there are also (2) “known unknowns”, or phenomena we know that we don’t know about. Third category comprises of (3) “unknown unknowns”, that is the things we don’t even know that we don’t have any knowledge about. However, as Žižek points, the most important category is that of (4) “unknown knowns”, or of the phenomena that we don’t know that we know (Žižek 2006). This knowledge is precisely the unconscious excluded from the survey that Bourdieu talks about. It is the knowledge of all “disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves, but which nonetheless determine our acts and feelings (Žižek 2006: 52).” It is a knowledge that, strictly speaking, does not know itself.

Now, applying this typology to social survey, it is clear that the method can generate meaningful insights only about phenomena from the first category of the things subjects are cognitively aware of. Subjects can in principle answer question concerning knowledge from the second category as well, but their answers would be at best mere guesses, at worst explicit lies (while subjects would be very well aware of that). On the other hand, it is absurd to ask about issues from the third category, and scientifically extremely interesting but ex definition impossible to gain any knowledge about phenomena from the fourth one (or at least by means of a survey). Then, what place within the space delineated by this typology does knowledge concerning one’s subjective inner worlds actually occupy? I have shown that the implicitly assumed subject of social survey is expected to have full autonomy in accessing, reflecting and reporting about her subjectivity. In other words, her own subjectivity is claimed to have the status of a known-known kind of knowledge to her. On the other hand, I have also discussed argumentation of other authors who argued that there is a profound lack of precision of the subjective data, which is caused by non-existence of the subjective phenomena in question. Subjectivity is in this case conceptualized as something foreign, as an unknown-unknown that is better to be avoided, at least as far as social survey is applied as the instrument of exploration.

However, there is a third option that still remains open for consideration. Subjectivity can be conceptualized as being of the unknown-known kind, or as being a matter of latent unconscious determination that positively exists, but is nevertheless cognitively inaccessible to the subject. If this knowledge exists within the subject but has to remain ignored, what are the discourses that subjects produce when requested to contemplate about it? In order to seriously explore this issue, I have to turn to a discourse that explicitly theorizes unconscious as a fundamental building block of its theory of subject.

Unable subject

Let’s now assume an alternative subject in the place of implicit self-evident subject of the survey. This new subject is far from following the lines of the everyday intuition. It is the Žižek’s subject of the opposite

truth. One that draws on explicit, theoretically specified qualities of being unable to fully access, reflect or report on most of the relevant aspects of her own subjectivity. The point is to show that much of what one can say about ontological properties of the discourses that subjects produce (that is the subjective data of any kind, be it responses in the questionnaire or other reports) depends on the theoretical conceptualization of subjects that researchers have.

Lacanian psychoanalysis is the most logical choice here, since Lacan develops his conception of human subject as an answer to the Cartesian one, which he aims to both complement and negate. Yet, the Lacanian subject is much more than just a mischievous negation of the previously discussed subject of survey. It is important to keep in mind that Lacan offers a conception which is explicitly theoretically informed and also born out of his rich clinical practice. On the other hand, the conception of subject uncovered in the survey was only implicit and had to be reconstructed ex-post. However, it would be incorrect to speak of Lacanian conception of subject in singular, since human subject takes many different forms and shapes in different stages of Lacan's teaching (Fink 1995). Here, I am making use mostly of Lacan's theory of subject as a fundamental split between two discourses of the ego and the unconscious.

First of the two discourses is the seemingly conscious Cartesian ego, an equivalent of the subject of survey, as described in the previous chapters. This is the subject that says "I" and believes she is the author of her own ideas and thoughts that correspond to the external reality. Such one-dimensional subject may very well believe she is independent, autonomous and free-thinking is, but what characterizes her more accurately is rather what Lacan calls the false being (Fink 1995). False, because in reality, ego thinking consists of nothing more than just a set of ex-post rationalizations that correspond with subject's idealized self-image. Another important aspect of the ego is that its wrong perception of itself cannot be corrected, since "the ego is by its very nature a distortion, an error, a repository of misunderstanding (Fink 1995)."

According to Lacan, the idyllic unity of the Cartesian self is a misrecognition that masks the real, radically fragmented nature of subjectivity whose active agent is located rather in the unconscious (Elliot 2015). Lacanian unconscious, on the most general level, roughly corresponds to the classical Freudian conception. In other words, it is a power, force or a reason that intervenes into behavior of subjects despite their unawareness or even deliberate ignorance of its influence. The kind of thinking going on the unconscious level is nothing like the experiential thinking on the level of the ego. The main difference is that Lacan claims no agency for the unconscious he posits. Instead, in his conception the unconscious is "structured like a language": it is an impersonal discourse that blindly follows a kind of algorithmic grammar. For it is structured like and by a language, which is essentially a product of social forces beyond individual, it overflows with desires and fantasies of other people.

The same alien language however structures also thinking that goes on the level of conscious ego. Hence, as language is a product of others, so is the self. The Lacanian self is literally “an other” (Fink 1995). This is why Lacan claims that any self-knowledge that subjects have about themselves may in fact as far from the reality as a wild fantasy. But where then is the subject if the experiential self is a mere illusion and discursive unconscious does not need any agent? According to Lacan, subject is nothing more but the very split that separates the two irreconcilable dimensions.

The last important moment of Lacanian analysis is the inability of the subject to grasp conditions of its own its determination. Not that the subject would be totally incapable of such reflection, the problem is elsewhere. To abolish the misrecognition constitutive of the ego would mean losing one’s ontological consistency. Precisely because this knowledge is marked by a lethal dimension, subjects try to avoid it at every possible cost (Žižek 2008).

I have shown that the Lacanian conception of the subject really is a consistent negation of basically all the implicit pre-suppositions of the Cartesian subject of survey except for one: there is a positively existing truth about the core of one’s subjectivity. Nevertheless, this truth is deposited in subject’s unconscious, which means that it is practically not accessible, not even by the subject herself. Moreover, there is the aspect of deliberate avoidance of the truth for the reasons of the maintenance of her ontological consistency. The Lacanian subject being principally unable and/or reluctant to access the subjective truth about herself then generates discourses that are at best haphazard rationalizations of its own distorted self-image. Such discourses are systematically erroneous as their role is rather to maintain subject’s idealized self-perception then to generate any meaningful insights. In other words, the Lacanian subject is a distortion and being a distortion, she cannot perceive her reality in an unbiased way. Therefore, any information that such a subject generates cannot bring us any closer to the objective reality or the “truth”. What they can point to, however, are different mechanisms in which distorting processes work in a systematic way. And indirectly, through study of these, one can learn something about the real hidden core of subjectivity of subjects or respondents.

Concluding remarks – Lacanian subject of the survey?

So far the paper has been mostly critical, focusing on the issues related to the subjective data analysis and on what I identified as their cause – the implicit Cartesian conceptualization of the subject of the survey. Instead of providing summary of these critical points, I want to sketch an interesting thought experiment in this concluding part and to apply the Lacanian conception of the subject to the subjective survey data. Clearly, addressing respondents as Lacanian rather than Cartesian subjects would have important implications for the interpretation of the subjective data as well as for the research practice in more general terms.

Firstly, for the sake of theoretical-empirical consistency, the epistemological premise of unconscious determination of subjectivity should be translated also into methodological practice. Since the unconscious consists of the "unknown known" matter, it cannot be made an object of any survey question as such. In other words, no direct question could be designed to bring straight-forward answers about issues that are of an unconscious nature. On the other hand, this does not rule out the possibility of using the answers as referring to the unconscious phenomena indirectly. In methodological terms, this means that the statistical analysis of subjective data should be done within the framework of latent, rather than observable variables models. Without going into unnecessary details, the latent variable modeling as a sub-discipline of statistical modeling is based on the idea that there exist such complex constructs which are directly unobservable, but which nevertheless manifest themselves empirically through their influence on set of some related observable indicators. Researchers, then, study covariance between these indicators and through them reconstruct characteristics and relationships between different unobservable variables (see Finch - French 2015). It is important to emphasize that the choice of latent variable models is in this case not only logical, but also necessary. If the theoretical perspective states subjectivity cannot be directly observed, then, obviously, it cannot be directly measured and modeled either.

Secondly, accepting the cognitive limitations of respondents should mean to abandon the quest for uncovering of underlying objective reality of subjectivity. Since the core of such reality can neither be directly accessed nor reported, the subjective self-reports that one is dealing with may, in fact, consist of a radically different matter. In line with Lacanian reasoning, the data would actually comprise mostly ad-hoc rationalizations that respondents generate to maintain their idealized self-perception at every possible cost. If respondents' self-reports were systematically wrong by definition (the Lacanian understanding) and not randomly biased descriptions of their internal reality (the implicit philosophy of the survey), this would open up a whole new conceptual space for formulation of interesting research

problems. Instead of trying to avoid the bias by means of methodological rigor, researchers could try to embrace it, make it an important object of their interest and explore the systematic ways of its functioning. Thus, different systematic grounds for analysis of respondents' misperceptions of their subjectivity could be investigated – be it in their psychological (e.g. the cognitive dissonance and related mechanism) or social form (e.g. ideology and its functioning).

These conclusions may sound radical, but there have already been many classical sociological projects based on similar ideas of individuals fundamentally mistaken in their beliefs and actions resulting thereof. One does not even have to go to the field of psychoanalysis to find examples of research paradigms where individual actors appear as deluded and determined by external forces. A notable example of such approach is the Critical theory in its classical sense, as developed by scholars of The Frankfurt School. Substantial part of their reasoning is also based on the idea of providing agents with knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation (Geuss 1999: 2). Obviously, if social agents were capable of full autonomy and perfect reflectivity, they would be aware of what their true interests are and thus, there would be no need for a critical theory of this kind. Another noteworthy example are the rigorous studies in subversion of human rationality conducted by philosopher Ion Elster, who investigates different psychological mechanisms, or in other words tricks that our minds play on us[3] (Elster 2016). As a result of these tricks, one's choices are often not autonomous, but causally determined by one's actual constraints and thus irrational or non-free. The third and last example comes from no one else than Pierre Bourdieu who – albeit on different grounds - arrived at conclusions similar to those of this paper. In the criticism of what he calls the "abdication of empiricism" Bourdieu writes:

> „Many studies of motivations (especially retrospective ones) presuppose that subjects can momentarily possess the objective truth of their behaviour (that they continuously preserve an adequate memory of it), as if the representation they formed of their decisions and actions owed nothing to retrospective rationalization. No doubt one can and should collect the most unreal discourses – but only so long as they are seen not as explanation of behaviour but as an aspect of the behaviour to be explained (Bourdieu et al. 1991: 38)."

In order to conduct the analysis of subjective discourses seriously, that is, to determine what these discourses ontologically stand for in the first place, one needs a solid, theoretically informed conception of human subjectivity. It does not necessarily have to be the psychoanalytical one that I made use of in this paper. What is important, however, is to have some, explicitly chosen conception and to be fully

[3] It is important to mention that the mechanisms analyzed by Elster represent his attempt to show that the concept of unconsciousness has no place in a truly scientific analysis of irrationality of human behavior which can instead be explain "rationally", by a reference to more objective psychological mechanisms.

aware of its basic epistemological assumptions. This is the most effective defense against seductions of seemingly self-evident conceptions that assert themselves as logical, but which nonetheless skew and limit the whole research by restrictions resulting from their particular epistemologies. Of course, any epistemological approach has its own particular set of limitations – what is important is to make a conscious choice regarding one's epistemology, to choose one' s limitations if you want, instead of automatically accepting self-evident epistemologies and their implicit limitations as taken for granted. When these issues are properly considered, only then can a survey based research contribute to the explorations of human subjectivity in its own unique and valuable way. Or at least, so am I convinced.

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